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One man's tale of resisting the seducing spa sirens of Singapore

Gary LOW

Singapore Management University, [garylow@smu.edu.sg](mailto:garyl原因@smu.edu.sg)

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Headline: Commentary: One man's tale of resisting the seducing spa sirens of Singapore

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Why do people give in to pressure selling in the slimming and beauty industry? One consumer law professor explores the dazzling experience of stepping into a spa.

SINGAPORE: It sang to me like a siren to Odysseus. It sat silently in my inbox, but its call was deafening and irresistible.

It was a Groupon voucher for S\$38 for a one-time body analysis, consultation and fat reduction session at a spa located in the heart of the city. Guaranteed visible results without the prohibitive cost and hassle of liposuction, I thought.

I'll be honest about why I was attracted to this. For one, it's cheap. And the cheapness in me I cannot deny.

For another, a decade of being a stress-fuelled binge eating, beer guzzling twenty-something was long over but the consequences persisted and visibly at that.

And I was lazy. Why spend months sweating it out in the gym or early mornings jogging in the park when an inexpensive session in comfortable settings is all that is required? So I clicked, and that was that.

POSH FACADES

The facade of the spa was posh, with deep maroon and velvety furniture and fixtures, and dim lighting, giving off a sense of comfort and luxury. Music played in the background, and a light breezy scent filled the air, perhaps for the same purpose why frankincense and myrrh were once used, to distinguish patrician from plebeian.

The ladies who greeted me were polite to a fault and very friendly. Indeed, my visual, auditory and olfactory senses were already overpowered; I felt disarmed.

I was casually led to a room and asked to partially disrobe. It was explained to me that the machine used to analyse my body composition required skin contact. The machine had sparkly bits and bobs, and whirred inconspicuously. It was over in a matter of minutes.

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THE BAD NEWS AND THE GOOD NEWS

The spa clinician sat me down over a cup of tea, steam wisping over the cool air. She said, glancing sternly at the machine printout, there was nothing overtly alarming about the numbers. But things were not ideal either.

I had higher than normal bodily fat deposits in certain key areas, and these may have health implications. The visible consequence was that my body was disproportionate.

The insinuation was that my body was both unhealthy and ugly. I was evidently a walking, expiring, conference pear.

She then took me to an adjacent, posh-looking room. While in my state of semi-undress, she casually mentioned that the trial session I was entitled to would not yield immediate results. Instead, I should consider upgrading to a different and technologically more advanced treatment package.

A fearsome looking machine would then target and shoot invisible beams and freeze my recalcitrant fat cells, and thereafter have them somehow vapourised, she said. Okay, I started to think, Darth Vader was trying to sell me the Death Star.

She passed me a pamphlet with a lot of words. It included a picture of a local celebrity with a lithe body and a charming smile. Wow, if a celebrity endorses the Death Star, it must be true, I interpret the subliminal messaging.

"I" wasn't a "really bad case", she said. So all I needed was ten sessions at S\$5,888. My eyes widened noticeably.

Within half a breath, Darth Vader added that that was the usual price, but since I got to know them via their Groupon offer, I could get a promotional price of S\$3,888. Nobel laureates Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky call this technique "anchoring and adjusting".

MANY OPTIONS – TO PAY

She added that they accepted a dazzling array of credit cards and instalment plans. I looked away towards the dark wood laminate flooring, avoiding her intent gaze.

I flashed her a glance, and noticed she wasn't looking so confident any longer. Her voice, wavering almost imperceptibly, suggested I trial a session for a top-up of S\$88.

Sheepishly I acquiesced. I was embarrassed and wanted to avoid further embarrassment to her. She gave me a crooked smile.

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A rod protruded from the machine, with a suction cup on its head. She placed it on my belly where my 19-inch rims were beginning to form. It was cold to the touch and the session was shorter than a mini Thai massage. It ended, I dressed, I paid, I left.

A PIPE DREAM

The conclusion was clinical and business-like. Perhaps they did not entertain much optimism I might be a repeat customer. The red silhouette left by the cup remained for a few days.

For every one of those days, I stood religiously before my full-length mirror, willing my eyes to detect even a miniscule of a dent in my Great Wall of Fat. On some days I seemed fitter, on other days, fatter. I seemed to myself the same after the redness disappeared.

For some time after, I wondered whether I should have taken up the package.

I don't wonder anymore. I wasn't so much sold a couple of dates with a machine, but a pipe dream. A dream of Aristotelian physical perfection, piping superficial opiates to dull our bodily and emotional insecurities.

If someone were to talk to me about this in a brightly-lit hawker centre, these concerns probably wouldn't triggered. But entice someone into a carefully curated context and that just might happen. Did I, at any point in time, feel pressured? Definitely. But was it externally applied or self-induced? Probably both.

What seems apparent to me is that the typical customer who even thinks of going through some kind of beauty treatment already feels some vulnerability. And, once he or she walks through those doors, those vulnerabilities are accentuated and made apparent.

WAS THERE PRESSURE? YES AND NO

We gloss over the suspicion that the clinician also wears the salesperson's hat, invariably entangling their obligation to advise us what the best treatment plans would be, taking into account our interests, with that of raw, unadulterated commission or profit.

The law says that any contract must be entered into freely. There must be no pressure or influence unduly exerted.

Clearly, if I was detained for hours on end until I signed a ten-session package, or if my credit card was withheld and swiped for a four-digit sum instead of two, the law voids those transactions. If I came in for a S\$38 Groupon session, and embarrassment and alarmist language convinced me into topping up S\$88 for a different treatment or S\$3,888 for a package, was there undue pressure?

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Pressure comes in many forms, and when applied, may be soft in form though hard in its reception. The pressure I certainly felt varied in both intensity and emotional response.

It wasn't so much I had lost my faculty of decision, but there was to me a significant degree of background noise interfering with my own ability to evaluate what was in my best interest. At some level of generality, what happened to me at the spa is no different than being smooth talked into plunking my pension into Profitable Plots, a scheme that promised many Singapore investors high returns buying UK land.

Both, after all, deliberately arouse our base desires: Greed and vanity. What might differentiate one from the other, then?

There is something to be said about inducing a person to debase his own bodily imperfections in so naked a manner as a sinner before God. If absolution could so easily be bought, who wouldn't be tempted?

In hindsight, the experience made me feel like an insect fumbling towards a Venus fly trap. I could self-flagellate and say I ought to have known better. That would indeed be true if I were perfectly rational and emotionless. But then, I wouldn't quite be human, either.

I could blame the law for not protecting me from such practices. Yet I know the law's limits mean it frequently functions reactively, mopping up the tears spilt lamenting an error already made.

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The fact is we all make mistakes; it's the human condition. For some of us, it is also human to try to take advantage of that condition.

My view? If something is too good to be true, it often is. Don't take the bait.

If you do, then take heed of Homer's advice to resist the seducing calls of these spa sirens: Fill your ears to the brim with wax.

Dr Gary Low is presently on faculty at the Singapore Management University School of Law. He is also a consumer advocate. All views expressed are his own. His greatest challenge remains to rest the occasional pint on his belly.

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